***Acinetobacter baumanii*, “Iraqibacter”**

**Since OPERATION Iraqi Freedom** began in 2003, more than 700 US soldiers have been infected or colonized with *Acinetobacter baumannii*. The organism has already cause seven deaths in US hospitals along the evacuation chain. Four were unlucky civilians who picked up the organism at Walter Reed Army Medical Center in Washington, DC, while undergoing treatment for other life-threatening conditions. The Department of Defense has been waging a secret war within the larger mission in Iraq and Afghanistan - a war against antibiotic-resistant pathogens. To an aspiring “superbug”, war is anything but hell.

But where was the organism coming from? A task force was sent into Iraq and Kuwait to gather soil samples, swipe stretcher handles, and scour chow halls. They took samples of bacteria from the dirty wounds of soldiers as they were admitted to the combat support hospitals, and from cleaned and treated wounds just before the soldiers were evacuated to Germany.

The investigators did find *Acinetobacter* in Iraq, but it wasn't in the dirt or in the fresh wounds. Multidrug-resistant *Acinetobacter baumannii* was happily growing in the Intensive Care Units (ICUs) and operating rooms of the combat support hospitals. The wounded soldiers were not smuggling bacteria from the desert into military hospitals after all. Instead, they were picking it up there. The evacuation chain itself had become the primary source of infection. The Pentagon had accidentally invented a machine for accelerating bacterial evolution and was airlifting the pathogens halfway around the world.

**It's not over.** Acinetobacter is now a difficult part of daily life in many military hospitals, as it is in civilian ICUs and burn wards worldwide. And the rise of many other types of multidrug-resistant bacteria will make things even more difficult in the next few years, because there are few new antibiotics coming down the pipeline.

"The organisms are outpacing us, and the development of new antibiotics do not bring in incredible profits for the drug companies," says Robert Guidos, director of public policy for the Infectious Diseases Society of America. "We're planning for bioterrorism and pandemic influenza, but what about the hundreds of thousands of people dying each year from real-life situations? We need to think in longer terms."

One of the most unsettling long-term questions about the military outbreak is how far these organisms of war will travel now that thousands of Iraq veterans have entered the VA hospital system. Many of the older vets who are already there - struggling with chronic conditions for decades, in and out of nursing homes - fall into the bacteria's target population.

Once Acinetobacter makes itself at home in a health care facility, however, it's hard to get rid of and easy to pass along. The organism requires many different assaults. This is because, out of its 52 genes dedicated to defeating antibiotics, radiation, and other weapons of mass bacterial destruction, nearly all have been acquired from other disease-causing organisms, like *Salmonella* and *E. coli*.